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ABSTRACT

Homosexual college student issues of significance to college student union and student activities professionals are discussed. It is suggested that the knowledge base should include an understanding of various theories of sexual orientation development, the unique developmental tasks that gay men and lesbians face, legal sanctions and rights, and the AIDS epidemic. Developmental tasks identified have to do with: coming out; positive self-concept; primary relationships; homophobia and harassment; discrimination; and dealing with rejection. Issues for the campus environment include institutional policies, personnel attitudes, and harassment. The college union and student activities staffs can provide guidance for student organizations, topics in lectures or films, campus leaders' education, and reading room offerings to help both gay and non-gay students. Contains 12 references. (LB)

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Working with gay and lesbian students

Dick Scott

As college campuses move toward a multicultural environment, lesbian and gay students are becoming more open about their sexual orientation and more assertive in securing their niche in the campus culture. Union and activities professionals are being called upon to work with this group of students about whom they may know little.

Areas of knowledge

College union and student activities professionals need to develop a knowledge base for working with gay and lesbian students. This base should include an understanding of various theories of sexual orientation development, the unique developmental tasks gay men and lesbians face, legal sanctions and rights, and the AIDS epidemic.

Sexual orientation development theory

Over the years various theories have been developed to explain homosexuality. These can be divided into two groups: psychoanalytic theories which view homosexuality as a psychopathological state resulting from one or more problems and biological theories which explain homosexuality in terms of hormonal imbalances or genetic mutations. These theories assume homosexuality is a deviance—nature gone wrong—which should be corrected through treatment designed to change the individual's behavior or orientation. They view human sexual orientation as a dichotomy; people are either heterosexual and therefore normal, or they are homosexual. These theories attempt to explain the development of homosexuality only; they generally ignore the development of heterosexuality.

The Kinsey Reports released in 1948 and 1953 challenged these theories. Kinsey and his associates developed a scale to measure the heterosexual/homosexual balance of the respondents to their interviews. Results showed a continuum, not a dichotomy, between homosexual and heterosexual inclinations. Among the men interviewed:

- more than half had had an emotional or physical sexual response to another man.
- 37 percent had had some overt homosexual experience to the point of orgasm.
- 25 percent had had more than incidental experience.
- 18 percent had engaged in as much homosexual activity as heterosexual activity for a period of at least three years.
- 10 percent had engaged in homosexual activity predominantly for at least three years.
- 4 percent had engaged exclusively in homosexual activity for their entire lives. (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, 1948)

The 1953 Kinsey Report indicated that the incidence of homosexual activity among women was approximately one-half to one-third that of the men (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Beghard, 1953).

Since the release of the Reports, theories addressing this continuum have described the development of human sexuality in terms of erotic stimuli, sexual value systems, and orientation. Common among these theories is the view that homosexual inclinations and activity are natural and normal within the spectrum of human sexuality.

A deeper discussion of the theories of human sexuality development and the diversity of experiences can be obtained in Bell and Weinberg (1978), Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948), Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Beghard (1953), Tripp (1975), Weinberg (1972), and Wilson (1978).

Developmental tasks

Lesbians and gay men face a series of developmental tasks which are either unique to them or which have different parameters from similar tasks faced by non-gay people. As lesbians and gay men will face some or all of these tasks during their college years, professionals who work with students need to understand these tasks and should develop the appropriate skills, policies, and programs to help students.

Coming out. One aspect of the development of a sexual identity is

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the recognition by the individual of a sexual orientation. All individuals do this at some point in their lives, often without realizing it. For lesbians and gay men, this process takes on added meaning because it involves recognizing oneself as different from others. Recognition of this difference can be a traumatic experience, particularly if the only information one receives indicates that a same-sex orientation is deviant, wrong, and sinful. It is an experience which can cause emotional distress and feelings of loneliness and rejection.

Individuals deal with this self-recognition of difference in one of several ways. They can deny it by refusing to accept what they recognize in themselves and by engaging in heterosexual activities in an attempt to convince themselves and others that their homosexual inclinations are not true. They can suppress their homosexual inclinations, recognizing them but engaging in heterosexual activities or abstaining from sexual activity in an attempt to eliminate or subdue their true feelings. They can acknowledge their inclinations to other gay men and lesbians whom they meet but hide them from others with whom they live and work. Such individuals generally fear exposure and take elaborate precautions to avoid it. Or they can accept their inclinations by "coming out," a process which may span several years. It involves not only accepting one's own homosexual inclinations, but also publicly acknowledging them to others and living a life based upon the inclinations.

Several books, including some rather humorous novels, can give readers a perspective on the process of coming out. These include Kantrowitz (1977), Miller (1971), and Reid (1973).

Positive self-concept. Most gay men and lesbians grow up without contact with openly gay or lesbian people. Homosexual inclinations and those who have them are referred to in derogatory terms and are condemned as wrong and sinful by parents, friends, religious leaders, teachers, and others throughout childhood. Gay men and lesbians often accept such attitudes, and coming out does not in itself change those beliefs. A key task for the lesbian or gay man is to overturn negative feelings about the self and develop a positive sense of personal value.

Primary relationships. Human society emphasizes and values the development and maintenance of a relationship with another person and has developed elaborate systems of support for that relationship, provided that the relationship is with a person of the opposite sex. No such value or support is given to relationships between same-sex partners. No state will sanction a same-sex marriage; no religion will recognize it; parents, relatives, and non-gay friends often refuse to acknowledge it. The lesbian or gay man who has or is developing a primary relationship must look elsewhere for support and for role models of successful relationships.

Discrimination. Lesbians and gay men must also learn how to deal with outright discrimination on the college campus. Whether it occurs in the classroom, employment, housing, or health center, they must choose either to accept it or to fight it. Institutional policies and procedures, counseling, and offers of personal support by faculty and administrators will all influence which option a person chooses.

Dealing with rejection. Revealing one's sexual orientation entails taking the risk that others will react negatively. They may refuse to accept what the person is saying, condemn the person, or reject the person and break off the relationship. College students who come out may find themselves asked to leave by roommates, have friends stop associating with them, and even have their parents refuse to communicate with them. Such rejection can last for brief periods or be permanent. Regardless of the severity or duration of the rejection, it is a period of emotional stress for lesbians and gay men, particularly when it involves people with whom they are close.

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Many people form their primary relationships during the college years. Gay men and lesbians are no different in this; however, they face the more difficult task of doing so in the face of disapproval and discouragement from the non-gay society around them. Professionals who work with gay and lesbian students need to be aware of this difficulty and provide the resources and assistance their students need.

Homophobia and harassment. Gay men and lesbians must learn how to react to the fear and hatred of them which many non-gay people have. Graffiti, anti-gay remarks, "faggot/dyke" jokes, and outright violence are common on college campuses and elsewhere. Walking on campus or sitting in class can be difficult or unpleasant. Lesbians and gay men need to learn how to respond to such behavior and how to handle their own emotional reactions to it.

Legal issues

The legal issues surrounding gay men and lesbians are complex and inconsistent from one place to another. Most relevant laws are at the state level; however, some cities have passed ordinances. About half the states have laws making sexual relations between persons of the same sex illegal. A recent U.S. Supreme Court case upheld the right of states to adopt laws restricting private consensual sexual relations between adults. Several states and some cities have adopted "Gay Rights" ordinances prohibiting dis-

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crimination on the basis of sexual orientation in a variety of applications including housing, employment, and access to governmental services.

Other legal issues of concern to gay men and women include the ability to retain custody of their children, the adoption of children, the formation of contractual relationships (since state-recognized marriages do not exist) for purposes of property ownership and inheritance, and hospital visitation rights for same-sex partners. Professionals who work with college students as advisers or as employers should know the legal status of gay men and lesbians in the college community. A good reference for the status of legal issues is Sloan (1987).

AIDS and other health issues

Colleges and universities are beginning to respond to the epidemic of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). They are installing condom machines, distributing literature, and developing a variety of programs to educate students about the disease. While it is now recognized that AIDS is not a disease of only gay men, it is of paramount importance to them. Gay college students may face an array of problems created by the disease. Fear of association with gay men and discrimination against them because of AIDS are common; worry about personal health and the emotional distress that occurs when a friend is diagnosed can impair a student's ability to meet academic obligations. Keeling (1986) provides a good introduction to the problem of AIDS on campus and possible institutional responses.

Campus environment

One way college union and student activities professionals can have an impact on the lives of lesbian and gay students is by structuring the campus environment to be more responsive to the needs of those students. This can be done through developing and implementing policies, through influencing the attitudes of campus personnel, and by taking steps to eliminate harassment of individuals on the campus.

Institutional policies

Colleges and universities, and college unions when they have their own policies, can affect the campus environment by adopting a variety of policies. Inclusion of sexual orientation in the institution's statement of non-discrimination and in its statements on sexual harassment is an important step. It not only sends a strong message to the university community but also provides greater security for gay and lesbian students and employees and a basis for action when discrimination does occur.

Institutions can incorporate language into their personnel policies that will give recognition to same-sex relationships. The University Student Union at California State University–Northridge has included the clause "other person residing in the employee's household" in its definition of "immediate family," thus allowing sick leave and funeral leave to be applied to same-sex partners in the same manner as they apply to spouses in state-recognized marriages. Colleges should also adopt policies on how students and other members of the community who develop AIDS will be treated.

Personnel attitudes

College union and student activities staff should be expected to work with lesbians and gay men in the same manner as they work with other students. Supervisors can set the office tone by not allowing homophobic statements or actions to be seen as acceptable and by encouraging gay and lesbian staff members to be open in the office. Staff education programs can provide information to employees who have had little contact with gay men or lesbians.

Harassment

Staff members in college unions and student activities offices can prevent or discourage visual, verbal, or physical harassment of lesbian and gay students. Graffiti and signs that are anti-gay should be immediately removed. Verbal and physical attacks on lesbians and gay men should be countered by appropriate disciplinary actions. Such actions should be given proper public notice to discourage others from future activities. Staff and volunteers should be trained to spot and report potential problems so that preventive action can be taken.

Programs

The college union and student activities staffs can produce a variety of programs that will aid lesbians and gay men in their academic pursuits and personal development and that will educate non-gay students about homosexuality and related concerns.

Student organizations

Although many campuses have a variety of gay and/or lesbian student groups, the right of such organizations to be chartered and funded has not been consistently upheld by the various states. In addition, some private institutions have not recognized such groups on the basis of conflict with the institution's mission.

The lesbian and gay student organization provides a means for students to meet, offer mutual support, develop social and educational

programs which meet their needs, and assist others who are coming out or experiencing problems related to their sexual orientation. Some campuses may have several organizations reflecting different purposes or the diversity of interests within the gay community. Political organizations, social interest clubs, literary groups, support centers, and "rap" lines all have their role for gay and lesbian students.

Ideally, the institution should treat such organizations in the same manner as other campus clubs and organizations. By applying the same requirements for recognition, the same criteria for funding, and the same guidelines for publicizing events of these organizations, professionals can ensure equal treatment. Where the decisions on recognition or funding are made through student committees, the student activities staff should educate and train committee members to help them objectively evaluate the group's request.

Lectures/films

Incorporating topics relating to homosexuality into the college union's lecture programs is an effective way of meeting the needs of gay and lesbian students and educating non-gay students at the same time. In many large cities, a gay speakers bureau can provide lesbian or gay men to speak on a variety of issues.

Films with gay themes can also be incorporated into the main film series on the campus. In addition, a variety of documentaries on gay life are available for special programs. One such film is "Word Is Out" (available from New Yorker Films) in which lesbians and gay men from diverse backgrounds talk about coming out, relationships, and living. References for films with gay themes or characters can be found in Russo (1980) and Tyler (1972).

Campus leaders' education

Workshops on homosexuality and homophobia can be incorporated into the campus leadership training programs. Such workshops can be directed toward educating non-gay students about sexual orientation, institutional policies on non-discrimination, and the problems lesbian and gay students can experience in a hostile campus environment. Inviting lesbian and gay students to participate in such workshops as speakers can make great impact on non-gay students who may believe they have never had personal contact with a person who is gay or lesbian.

Student activities staff, working with campus counselors or other trained professionals, can also develop workshops and programs geared to gay and lesbian students. These programs can focus on the special developmental tasks of such students or on providing peer counseling and assistance to other students.

Reading room offerings

College union reading rooms can subscribe to one or more of the national gay/lesbian publications: *The Advocate* (biweekly newspaper, 6922 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028), *The Body Politic* (a Canadian newspaper, c/o Pink Triangle Press, P.O. Box 7298, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5W 1X9), *Christopher Street* (a literary and entertainment magazine, c/o That New Magazine, Inc., P.O. Box 1475, Church Street Station, New York, NY 10008), or the *Journal of Homosexuality* (a research publication, c/o Haworth Press, 28 E. 22nd Street, New York, NY 10010). The reading room can also subscribe to a local newspaper; lesbian/gay papers are now published in nearly every state as well as most major cities.

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